The Paris Review

Jonathan Franzen, The Art of Fiction No. 207

Interviewed by Stephen J. Burn

Jonathan Franzen's fiction bears the mark of a Midwest upbringing, his books preoccupied with quiet lives nurtured there and broken apart by contact with the rest of the world. But four long novels into an unusually public career, Franzen now moves about the country quite a bit, living most of the year in New York, where he writes in an office overlooking busy 125th Street, and some of it in a leafy community on the outskirts of Santa Cruz, where I met him just a few days before his most recent novel, *Freedom*, was released.

The scale of *Freedom*'s rapturous reception isn't yet evident on the morning of our first conversation, though the book has already been called "the novel of the century," and its author has just become the first writer in a decade to appear on the cover of *Time* magazine; a visit to the White House is soon to come. At the same time, two popular female novelists have been arguing, via Twitter, that Franzen owes his stature to the prejudices and gender asymmetries of book reviewing, and there are hints, too, that a broader backlash is brewing. (In London a few weeks later, he'll have his glasses stolen by pranksters at a book party.) As we drive through the morning fog, Franzen recounts both sides to me as if he has no vested interest in either position—his stance is that of a detached, and slightly amused, observer.

Jonathan Franzen was born in 1959, in Western Springs, Illinois, and raised in Webster Groves, a suburb of St. Louis. The youngest of three children, Franzen grew up in a home dominated by pragmatic parents—his father an engineer, his mother a homemaker—who saw little value in the arts and who encouraged him to occupy himself instead with more practical subjects. A fascination with the sciences hangs over much of Franzen's early writing, composed before his arrival at Swarthmore College. One unpublished story describes a visit from Pythagoras. An early play about Isaac Newton was championed by a physics teacher at Webster Groves High School.

Franzen describes his first book, *The Twenty-Seventh City* (1988), as a sci-fi novel that is all *fi* and no *sci*—a concept-driven omnibus fiction in which a group of influential and politically ambitious Indians, led by the former police commissioner of Bombay, infiltrate the bureaucracy of an unspectacular Midwestern town and terrorize its residents. *The Twenty-Seventh City* is set in his native St. Louis, but Franzen wrote the majority of the novel while employed as a research assistant at Harvard University's Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences, where he worked crunching data on seismic activity. This experience would enrich his second novel, *Strong Motion* (1992), an intimate depiction of a Massachusetts family whose emotional and economic lives are disrupted by a series of unexpected earthquakes in the Boston area.

Strong Motion signaled the start of a turbulent decade for Franzen, as he suffered personal losses—the death of his father; divorce from Valerie Cornell, his wife of fourteen years—and struggled to come to terms with the purpose of writing fiction after his first two novels won critical praise but dishearteningly few readers. Those struggles were the subject of much of the searching nonfiction he wrote during the nineties, and his midcareer masterpiece *The Corrections* (2001) was the outcome. The expansive saga of a disjointed Midwestern family, *The Corrections* won the National Book Award and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, and introduced

izen, then a relatively obscure author of ambitious fiction, to the broad audience of readers he had long en seeking—a broader audience than any literary novelist of his generation.

The following interview took place over two days in an office borrowed from the University of California, Santa Cruz. Situated amid redwoods on the mountain rim above Santa Cruz and Monterey Bay, the office would have offered an ocean view, but a makeshift arrangement of towels, bedsheets, and pillows had been engineered to block out the combined dangers of light and distraction. Improvised window treatments aside, Franzen prefers his work space to resemble Renée Seitchek's house in *Strong Motion*—a "bare, clean place." Aside from a laptop, the only personal items in the room were six books, arranged in a single pile: a study of William Faulkner, Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, and four works by John Steinbeck.

INTERVIEWER

Have you matured as a writer?

FRANZEN

When *The Twenty-Seventh City* was being misunderstood, and when *Strong Motion* was failing to find an audience, I assumed that the problem was not the writer but the wicked world. By the time I was working on *Freedom*, though, I could see that some of the contemporaneous criticisms of those books had probably been valid—that the first really was overdefended and inexplicably angry, and that the politics and thriller plotting (and, again, the inexplicable anger) of the second really were sometimes obtrusive. The writer's life is a life of revisions, and I came to think that what needed revision were my own earlier books.

One of the great problems for the novelist who persists is the shortage of material. We all solve the problem in different ways; some people do voluminous research on nineteenth-century Peru. The literature I'm interested in and want to produce is about taking the cover off our superficial lives and delving into the hot stuff underneath. After *The Corrections* I found myself thinking, What is my hot material? My Midwestern childhood, my parents, their marriage, my own marriage—I'd already written two books about this stuff, but I'd been younger and scared and less skilled when I wrote them. So one of the many programs in *Freedom* was to revisit the old material and do a better job.

INTERVIEWER

Better how?

FRANZEN

I understand better how much of writing a novel is about self-examination, self-transformation. I spend vastly more time nowadays trying to figure out what's stopping me from doing the work, trying to figure out how I can become the person who can do the work, investigating the shame and fear: the shame of self-exposure, the fear of ridicule or condemnation, the fear of causing pain or harm. That kind of self-analysis was entirely absent with *The Twenty-Seventh City*, and almost entirely absent with *Strong Motion*. It became necessary for the first time with *The Corrections*. And it became the central project with *Freedom*—so much so that the actual writing of pages was almost like a treat I was given after doing the real work.

INTERVIEWER

There was a nine-year interlude between those two novels.

The Corrections cast a shadow. The methods I'd developed for it—the hypervivid characters, the interlocking-novellas structure, the leitmotifs and extended metaphors—I felt I'd exploited as far as they could be exploited. But that didn't stop me from trying to write a *Corrections*-like book for several years and imagining that simply changing the structure or writing in the first person could spare me the work of becoming a different kind of writer. You always reach for the easy solution before you, in defeat, submit to the more difficult solution.

There certainly was no shortage of content by the middle of the last decade. The country was in the toilet, we'd become an international embarrassment, and those materialistic master languages that I'd mocked in *The Corrections* were becoming only more masterful. And I still had my own deep autobiographical material, which I'd employed in well-masked form in the first two novels. Eventually I realized that the only way forward was to go backward and engage again with certain very much unresolved moments in my earlier life. And that's what the project then became: to invent characters enough unlike me to bear the weight of my material without collapsing into characters too much like me.

INTERVIEWER

Your first publication was a collaborative play called *The Fig Connection*, which you wrote in high school. What interested you about drama?

FRANZEN

I'm that oddity of a writer who had a good high-school experience, and I did a lot of acting in various plays. Theater for me was mainly a way of having fun in groups, as opposed to pairing off into couples who necked all night in a back seat. It was a kind of prolonged innocence. I wasn't particularly in love with the theater, and the plays that my friends and I wrote weren't literary. We were just making stuff up for fun. Until I was twenty-one, I had no concept of literature, really.

INTERVIEWER

Had your childhood been innocent, too?

FRANZEN

I always seemed to be the last person to find out about things that everybody else knew. I was literally still playing with building blocks, albeit artistically and with friends, during my senior year in high school.

INTERVIEWER

Was your writing encouraged at home?

FRANZEN

Mostly not, no. I hate the word *creative*, but it's not a bad description of my personality type, and there was no place for that in my parents' house. They considered art of all kinds, including creative writing, frivolous. Art was something I could do in my free time, and if I could get school credit for it, so much the better. But it was actively discouraged as a serious pursuit. My parents were dismayed and perplexed and angry when my older brother Tom stopped studying architecture and majored in film, and when he went to the Art Institute in Chicago and got an M.F.A. Tom was the only working artist I knew, and I idolized him and wanted to be like him, rather than like my parents. But I'd seen the grief he'd gotten from them, so I kept my own plans secret for as long as possible.

My dad, although he didn't get a good formal education, was tremendously smart and curious. He read to me every night throughout my early childhood, always my dad, not my mom. Having grown up bathed nightly in his strong opinions, I became a fairly opinionated person myself and was happy to be able to keep him company. He read *Time* magazine cover to cover every week, and we talked about whatever was going on in the world. So, strangely, there was a lot of intellectual discussion in that otherwise unintellectual house. But there were no literary books on my parents' shelves. I had no category for what I wanted to do, and this was the great excitement of writing *The Fig Connection*, seeing how well it worked as a student drama, and then, wonder of wonders, getting it published. This was the moment when a world of possibility opened up: I remember thinking, I'm actually good at writing—and isn't this fun?

INTERVIEWER

It sounds like fun was an important part of your early writing.

FRANZEN

Fun is still an important part of writing. I want to bring pleasure with everything I write. Intellectual pleasure, emotional pleasure, linguistic pleasure, aesthetic pleasure. I have in my mind five hundred examples of novels that have given me pleasure, and I try to do work that gives back some of what those five hundred books have given me. The epigraph of *Strong Motion* is taken from Isaac Bashevis Singer, who is very simpatico in this regard. His Nobel speech, in which he asserts that the storyteller's primary responsibility is to entertain, made a deep impression on me.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel burdened by that obligation to entertain?

FRANZEN

More motivated than burdened. It's hard to feel burdened by the knowledge that pleasure-seeking people are actually looking forward to my next book. For the first half of my career, though, I had a very poor sense of who these people might be. Some snarky person in England once accused me of writing the *Harper's* essay "Why Bother?" as market research.

INTERVIEWER

How did you feel about that?

FRANZEN

Well, in a narrow sense, he was absolutely right. When your first two novels haven't found much of an audience, it makes sense to stop and try to figure out who *might* read a literary novel nowadays, and why they might be doing it.

And finding an audience has unquestionably changed the way I write. If there's a different feel to *Freedom* than to *The Corrections*, it's not unrelated to having met however many thousand readers on various book tours. These are the people who are reading books, caring about books, and bothering to come out on a rainy Tuesday night to hear somebody read aloud, as to a child, and then standing for half an hour waiting to get a scribble on the title page of a book they've spent money for. These people are my friends. I'm one of them myself. I once stood in a long signing line to get five seconds with William Gaddis, just so I could tell him how great I thought *The Recognitions* was. Not everything in the world needs to be laughed angrily at, you realize.

here turn out to be more emotions available to a working writer than I might have guessed earlier on. And one of them might be love—love and gratitude.

I got a lot of attention as a kid because everyone else in the house was so much older than me. It was probably too much attention—that can be a burden—but one result is that I like attention. I just like attention, I do! But it's counterbalanced by a need and craving to be alone most of the time. This is one reason I've found being a writer a very suitable profession. You have the possibility of great bursts of satisfying attention, and then you're left alone.

INTERVIEWER

When did you begin to think of yourself as a writer?

FRANZEN

I had a notion of myself as a writerly person by the time I got to college, which meant that there were two things I could do: I could go out for the newspaper, and I could send things to the college literary magazines. I did both. But I hated being a journalist, because I was too shy to do interviews. I once got my friend Tom Hjelm and me in trouble by making him do an interview with the vice president of the college, as part of a news story I was writing, and then twisting the vice president's words to make him look bad. In many ways, Hjelm was the toughest critic I ever had. He was an E. B. White worshiper, and he loved to ridicule my worst sentences. We read each other's papers, too—there was a mutual-apprenticeship quality to our friendship.

INTERVIEWER

Was there a similar quality to your reading?

FRANZEN

It slowly became more serious in the course of four years of college. I'd read a lot as a kid—eight hours a day all summer, some summers—but it was mostly mysteries and popular science and science fiction. Then, because I went to college as a prospective physics major, I took only one class in English literature during my first three years, a survey of the modern English novel. Predictably, I was most smitten with Iris Murdoch. I was eighteen, and *A Severed Head* seemed to me a profound and important book.

The one writer I completely couldn't stand was D. H. Lawrence. I wanted to kill him for having inflicted *Sons and Lovers* on me. Much later, I went back and read the book again, or read half of it, because I felt that the Joey and Patty material in *Freedom* had some kinship with the Morels. And I could see why I'd hated it when I was eighteen: It hit way too close to home. But frankly I still found it kind of unbearable. I wanted to say to Lawrence, No, you have *not* found a way not to make Mrs. Morel's sexualized engulfment of her son icky and excruciating. In a way, it's great and heroic that Lawrence was willing to write such an excruciating book, to lay it all out there. But for me the book also became a shining example of how not to approach this radioactive material—a reminder of the pressing need to find a structure and a tone and a point of view that would ironize it enough to make it *fun*.

My real problem with the survey class was that I was too young for it. Like most eighteen-year-olds, I didn't have enough experience to understand what the stakes even were in adult literature. Because I hadn't grown up in a household that placed any value on culture, literature was just a game to me, and writing was just a craft that I hoped to make a living with someday. I wrote whatever the newspaper editors assigned me to write and worked on my sentences.

ERVIEWER

Do you recall any pieces in particular?

FRANZEN

The piece I had the most fun with was a fall campus-fashion preview. I wrote it as a joke, in very ornate prose.

INTERVIEWER

There are several fashion articles in the archive.

FRANZEN

Several articles? Good Lord. I was having a bad time at school. Those fashion pieces probably came out of a wish to antagonize.

INTERVIEWER

A bad time?

FRANZEN

I had bad dorm rooms, and I'd landed in a nerdy situation as a prospective physics major. There were very few cute girls, and those few had no interest in me. My only significant ambition was to get laid, and I was failing spectacularly at it, for reasons now obvious to me but completely invisible at the time. I thought about transferring to a different school, but then I realized that if I majored in German I could go to Europe for a year, and that things might be better there.

Things were not better there, at least not girlwise. But I came back to the States less outrageously immature. And every once in a while a person's life feels like a novel, and the eight weeks in the middle of my last year of college were a time like that. Everything came together quickly, all the stuff that had been latent suddenly crystallized, and I felt transformed in the space of eight weeks. I became a human being. By the end of that January, I was having sex with the person I would end up married to for fourteen years, and I'd become a determined, focused writer who wanted to do nothing but write ambitious novels.

INTERVIEWER

What had happened?

FRANZEN

I wrote about it in *The Discomfort Zone*—my discovery, as Rilke puts it in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, that I had an interior life I'd previously known nothing about. It had to do with reading Rilke and Kafka and the other modern German prose writers, and it had to do with my brother Tom. It had to do with having been away from my family for so long—with coming back and suddenly being able to see them in the framework that the German moderns had given me. It had to do with falling in love.

INTERVIEWER

What about your brother?

FRANZEN

, was in deep emulation of Tom, who had begun as a still photographer and then moved into avant-garde film. I admired Tom's equipment, as it were. Right before I'd gone to Germany, I'd worked for him as a laborer in Chicago and had made enough money to buy a little Olympus, the smallest SLR on the market, which I took to Europe and tried to do art photography with. I wanted to take odd pictures, especially ones of the industrial areas, again in emulation of Tom, who had an urban-industrial aesthetic.

But I always had an uneasy relationship with pictures. I could never figure out what I was trying to do with photography. Landscape photography in particular: Oh, it's a pretty sunset. Oh, that's a pretty rock formation. Who the fuck cares? I'd come to associate it with what I perceived as my mother's obsession with appearances —her dictating what I wore to school, her constant fussing with the decoration of our house, her shame about having kids who were different from her friends' kids, the general barrenness of worrying so much about surfaces. A persistent fantasy I had throughout my late teens and twenties was that I was being followed with a camera, and that people who hadn't respected me enough, girls who hadn't wanted me, would see where I was now and be impressed. It was an awful reverie, because I could feel, even as I was having it, that it was an inheritance of that obsession with surfaces.

In the spring of my junior year in Europe, Tom had come over and traveled with me, and when we were in Milan his movie camera was stolen. By the following Christmas, it was clear that he wasn't going to get a new one. He'd given up filmmaking, and I now had the burden and the opportunity to be the family artist. And, specifically, to be a writer, given my disenchantment with images.

INTERVIEWER

Is that obsession with appearances still a concern to you?

FRANZEN

Exhibitionism is a problem for any writer. The craving for an audience, coupled with the shame of exposing yourself to it. This is stuff that I was always tormented by and have been working through as recently as in *Freedom*.

But I had all the clues I needed in Germany, in Nietzsche: "Everything that is deep loves the mask." *The Twenty-Seventh City* is one big mask. And the long-term ambition for all my work has been to find better and better masks—to find the means to make visible and feelable the unsayable things inside me.

INTERVIEWER

How did you accomplish it?

FRANZEN

I was a skinny, scared kid trying to write a big novel. The mask I donned was that of a rhetorically airtight, extremely smart, extremely knowledgeable middle-aged writer. To write about what was really going on in me with respect to my parents, with respect to my wife, with respect to my sense of self, with respect to my masculinity—there was just no way I could bring that to the surface. I'd tried writing about it directly in short stories before I got going with *The Twenty-Seventh City*, and I just hadn't had the chops to get at it, didn't have enough distance on it, didn't understand it well enough. So I put on the mask of a middle-aged postmodern writer.

Looking back now, I see a twenty-five-year-old with a very compromised sense of masculinity, of his own maleness. There was a direct transfer of libido to the brain—this was my way of leaving the penis out of the

quation and going with what I knew I had, which was that I was smarter than most people. It had been drummed into me by my dad: "You are smarter than most people." He felt himself to be smarter than most people, probably rightly so. He felt that it had taken him too long to figure this out, and he said to me, many times, "Don't make the mistake I made." So I set a lot of store in being brainy. And satire was particularly appealing, because, first, it was funny, and I always liked to be funny, and, second, you didn't have to take responsibility for generating your own faith, your own core beliefs. You could simply expose the mendacity and falseness of others. It was a way for the baby of his family—who'd been surrounded, as a kid, by three powerful male presences—to exercise some kind of mastery and cut other people down to size. And, no less important, it was a way to ignore the maternal side of the equation. During those amazing winter weeks of 1980 and 1981, my mother had literally been made sick, seriously ill, by news about the sex life of one of my brothers. I'd seen firsthand that the mere expression of overt masculine sexuality could put a woman in the hospital! So it's really no wonder that intellect presented itself as a safer alternative in *The Twenty-Seventh City*.

In the later books, as I began to put the worst of my own *Sons and Lovers* psychodramas behind me, I reached for different kinds of masks. The reason it took so long to do *Freedom* was that the masks not only had to be extremely lifelike but also had to be invented out of whole cloth, because, again, after much trying and failing, I'd seen that there was no way I could write directly about certain central parts of my own experience, my experience with my mom and my experience in my marriage. What made direct revelation impossible was partly my sense of shame and partly a wish to protect third parties, but it was mostly because the material was so hot that it deformed the writing whenever I came at it directly. And so, layer by layer, I built up the masks. Like with papier-mâché, strip after strip, molding ever more lifelike features, in order to perform the otherwise unperformable personal drama.

INTERVIEWER

The mask is a way to convey truth, rather than to conceal it.

FRANZEN

Yes. But also recognizing, crucially, that the amorphous, unconscious, naked soul is a horror. The most terrifying scene in Rilke's *Malte Laurids Brigge* is the one in which Malte, as a boy, starts putting on party masks from a trunk in his family's attic, one after another, until finally one of them takes control of him. He sees his masked self in the mirror and goes momentarily insane with terror that there is no him, there's only the mask. Years later, as an adult, walking around in Paris, he sees a woman on a park bench who puts her face in her hands and then looks up with a naked face, a horrifying Nothing, having left the mask in her hands. *Malte* is essentially the story of a young writer working through a fear of masks to a recognition of their necessity.

Rilke anticipated the postmodern insight that there is no personality, there are just these various intersecting fields: that personality is socially constructed, genetically constructed, linguistically constructed, constructed by upbringing. Where the postmoderns go wrong is in positing a nullity behind all that. It's not a nullity, it's something raw and frightening and bottomless. It's what Murakami goes looking for in the well in *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*. To ignore it is to deny your humanity.

INTERVIEWER

The development of the American writer today most typically takes place within the university, in creative-writing programs. Did you consider that route?

FRANZEN

got married instead to a tough reader with great taste. We had our own little round-the-clock M.F.A. program. This phase of our marriage went on for about six years, which is three times longer than the usual program. Plus, we didn't have to deal with all the stupid responses to writing that workshops generate.

We did actually apply to some programs one year, in hopes of getting a university to support us financially, and we were both accepted at Brown. But the money Brown offered wasn't good enough. In hindsight, I'm glad I didn't go, because it might have smoothed some kinks out of the work that were better not smoothed out. As a journalist, I'm always striving to become more professional, but as a fiction writer I'd rather remain an amateur.

INTERVIEWER

Did you devise another kind of program for yourselves? Did you go to readings?

FRANZEN

No, we didn't want to be around other writers. In some semiconscious way, we recognized that we weren't good yet, and we needed to protect ourselves from depressing exposure to people who'd already gotten to be good.

INTERVIEWER

What books were you reading in those years?

FRANZEN

Everything. I read fiction four or five hours a night every night for five years. Worked through Dickens, the Russians, the French, the moderns, the postmoderns. It was like a return to the long reading summers of my youth, but now I was reading literature, getting a sense of all the ways a story could be made.

But the primal books for me remained the ones I'd encountered in the fall of 1980: *Malte*, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, *The Magic Mountain*, and, above all, *The Trial*. In each of these books the fundamental story is the same. There are these superficial arrangements; there is the life we think we have, this very much socially constructed life that is comfortable or uncomfortable but nonetheless what we think of as "our life." And there's something else - underneath it, which was represented by all of those German-language writers as Death. There's this awful truth, this maskless self, underlying everything. And what was striking about all four of those great books was that each of them found the drama in blowing the cover off a life. You start with an individual who is in some way defended, and you strip away or just explode the surface and force that character into confrontation with what's underneath. This was very straightforwardly and explicitly the program with *The Twenty-Seventh City*, to take the well-defended Probst and strip away and strip away.

INTERVIEWER

And you saw Martin Probst as a parallel to Joseph K.?

FRANZEN

Yes, in my own vulgar reading of Kafka, I did. Suddenly one day, for no reason, there were a bunch of Indians in St. Louis, and they were conspiring to ruin Probst's life.

INTERVIEWER

I recall reading that you labored over the beginning of *The Twenty-Seventh City*—wrote and rewrote it—and then wrote the final stages—

ANZEN

Most of the book.

INTERVIEWER

Most of the book, quite quickly.

FRANZEN

I'd started by working for months and months on the first chapter, which was about Probst walking his dog and thinking with culpably extreme satisfaction about his accomplishments. I poured countless hours into very purple sentences describing the beauty of the light in Webster Groves, my hometown, on a late weekday afternoon. It was a chapter that ended with the death of the dog. It was terribly overwritten.

INTERVIEWER

What do you mean by overwritten?

FRANZEN

Trying to do too much with a sentence. I was very much still under the spell of the Germans. You can do things in German with sentence structure that are less advisable in English—pack in all sorts of syntactical elements - before the final verb. I was playing with language and with the possibilities of sound, although not so much with alliteration. I'd read *Rabbit, Run* at a certain point and spent a couple of weeks being highly alliterative before coming to my senses and realizing that not only was my alliteration bad, Updike's was, too.

I was doing a lot of punning, though. I was very attached at that young age to pure linguistic play, and blissfully unaware of how it might all read. I thought the concept of my book, the unfolding of a conspiracy, ought to be strong enough to drag the reader through any amount of linguistic playfulness.

I was reaching; I was writing about stuff I didn't really know anything about and trying to incorporate every scrap of information and interesting observation I'd ever had. I would write as many pages as I could in a day. I once wrote seventeen pages in a day. And those seventeen pages are in the finished book. When I got rolling, my determination to get the book done and have it be good and get it published was so strong that I had limitless - energy. The finished manuscript was thirteen hundred pages. I was twenty-five.

INTERVIEWER

You've said you were writing eight hours a day.

FRANZEN

I could do ten sometimes.

INTERVIEWER

Even when things weren't working?

FRANZEN

I didn't have the experience of things not working. I didn't know enough to know when something wasn't all that good. The chapters just came clattering out.

, ERVIEWER

I'm struck by the number of dream sequences in *The Twenty-Seventh City*.

FRANZEN

More and more, I think of novel writing as a kind of deliberate dreaming. John Gardner described novels as "vivid, continuous dreams," and though I'm not sure Gardner ever wrote a particularly excellent novel, he was right about the notion of the dream. A notion reinforced by my feeling that all of Kafka's fiction reads like transcribed dreams.

Most of the dreams in *The Twenty-Seventh City* were dreams I'd had myself. I wanted their uncanniness because I was trying to write an uncanny book. A book about making strange a familiar place. And the fastest route to uncanniness is to fall asleep and have a dream in which everything is at once familiar and strange. That was the feel I was after in that book: What kind of weird, surreal world have I fallen into here, in the most boring of Midwestern cities?

If the dreams are falling away in the later books, I'd like to think it's because I'm getting better at making the book itself the dream. As I become more comfortable with accessing the primary psychic stuff inside me, and finding adequate dramatic vehicles for it, the need for the literal dream probably diminishes.

INTERVIEWER

How did you compose the book?

FRANZEN

I typed *The Twenty-Seventh City* on a Silver Reed typewriter. Then I set the book aside for nearly a year while I tried to find an agent. In hindsight, the responses of the top-drawer agents I'd sent it to seem remarkably gracious, although I didn't experience them that way at the time. Gloria Loomis told me on the phone, with a little laugh, "I'll get back to you when I've read the second—*box*."

That's when I did a translation of *Spring Awakening*, and I was working on some short stories again, with no more success than before. When I struck out with the agents, I called up the only writer I had any personal connection to, Hugh Nissenson, the novelist, and he proceeded to froth at the mouth for an hour about how stupid and corrupt the publishing industry was, and how lazy certain well-known writers were—it was somewhat embittered frothing. Then he asked me, "How long is the book?" And I told him, and he said, "I'm not going to read your book, but I can tell you right now it's two times too long. You've got to go back and cut it by half." Then he said, "Is there a lot of sex in it? There's gotta be a lot of sex in it."

It was a wonderful gift. I set down the phone and picked up the manuscript, which I hadn't looked at in eight months, and I said, "My God, there's two hundred pages that I can cut in half an hour." I just suddenly saw it. I suddenly made the connection between my needs as a reader and what I was doing as a writer, which I had never made before. That in fact I was not interested in punishing the reader, because I didn't enjoy being punished myself. If I wanted the book to be read, it needed to move, and so I had to make the cuts to make it move.

INTERVIEWER

David Foster Wallace wrote to you in the summer of 1988, after reading *The Twenty-Seventh City*.

ANZEN

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

When did you meet?

FRANZEN

I don't think we succeeded in meeting until 1990. I was away in Europe for a year, and he flaked on our first two appointments to meet, for reasons that became clearer later. It's a telltale sign of a substance problem when people don't show up.

INTERVIEWER

Was this your first friendship with another writer?

FRANZEN

Well, apart from my wife, yes. Around the same time, I also got to know Bill Vollmann, who was living in New York then.

INTERVIEWER

And what difference did this make?

FRANZEN

It's all bound up in the story of my marriage, which I really would prefer not to get into here. But, briefly put, it was a very hermetic marriage, and simply to be in conversation with other people who I thought were doing good work—and also to get their take on my marital situation—was huge. Soon after that, I got to know David Means, too. So right around the beginning of the nineties I suddenly had three male writer friends, as opposed to none. And because I was entering a period of radical doubt about the point of writing literary novels, it was an incredible blessing to talk with other people who were ambitious and thoughtful and talented, who were dedicating their lives to trying to write good books.

INTERVIEWER

You've said that you and Wallace corresponded about fiction less than people might expect.

FRANZEN

At a certain point, you get to be good enough friends that you pick up the phone rather than writing a letter. The letter-writing phase is sort of a "feeling out each other's position" phase. I came into those conversations with a feeling of an unattractively extreme rage against literary theory and the politicization of academic English departments. It was related to my growing antagonism toward a status model of the novel—the idea that a novel's highest achievement is to be read and studied by scholars. And yet my own attempts to connect with a larger audience had so far failed. Dave was very comfortable in the academy, but he himself was going through experiences that were making clear that there was more to life than producing interesting texts that a small number of very smart readers might engage with. His own life was in crisis, and he was coming into new material, his authentic personal material, and so he, too, welcomed a conversation about how to move beyond

ire intellectual play into realms of, for want of a better word, emotional significance. The point of agreement that he and I eventually reached was the notion of loneliness: that fiction is a particularly effective way for strangers to connect across time and distance. The formulation had slightly different meanings for the two of us, but it was the bridge we eventually found to connect his view to my view.

INTERVIEWER

And the difference?

FRANZEN

I took the notion, finally, as a call to arms to continue trying to write books that ordinary people, nonprofessionals, could connect with. I think that Dave, up to the time when he stopped writing, was still struggling with his distrust of the part of himself that wanted to please people.

I perceived, rightly or wrongly, that our friendship was haunted by a competition between the writer who was pursuing art for art's sake and the writer who was trying to be out in the world. The art-for-art's-sake writer gets a certain kind of cult credibility, gets books written about his or her work, whereas the writer out in the world gets public attention and money. Like I say, I perceived this as a competition, but I don't know for a fact that Dave perceived it that way. There's some evidence that he did, but he was a troubled person and was tormented by the possibility of people misperceiving him. His instinct was to keep people at a distance and let the work speak for itself, and I do know that he enjoyed the status he'd attained. He might have denied it, but he denied all sorts of obviously true things at different moments. He came from an academic family, and the fact that lots of books were being written about his work really was gratifying to him. In the way that sibling competition works, I've consistently maintained a position of not caring about that stuff. And Dave's level of purely linguistic achievement was turf that I knew better than to try to compete on.

INTERVIEWER

When did you first come across DeLillo?

FRANZEN

I remember a Christmas visit to my wife's family during which she gave me *Players*. I remember reading it on the train back up to Boston and having one of the purest aesthetic responses I've ever had. I'd finally found somebody who was putting on the page the apocalyptic, postindustrial urban aesthetic that I'd been looking for in film and photographs and had found expressed in music, particularly by Talking Heads. And here was somebody who was getting it on the page and writing like a dream. His prose was like a call to duty: You must write better. Here, see, it can be done. I find it remarkable that people don't talk more about *Players*. In certain ways, DeLillo never wrote better.

INTERVIEWER

What did you find so attractive about him?

FRANZEN

It came as no surprise when I learned, later, that he sometimes composed books with one paragraph on each page, starting a new page after only a few sentences. His paragraphs really do have a stand-alone quality. It was through reading him that I came to see pages as collections of individual sentences. For a young writer, in particular, the terrors of the paragraph become more manageable when you see it as a system of sentences. I

also started to see all the junk DNA that had cluttered my paragraphs before then, and that I'd been unaware of.

INTERVIEWER

DeLillo's sentences seem to involve intimate connections between individual words, even letters—a visual patterning.

FRANZEN

Yes. In my own work, I can see his visual influence in the dinner-table scene in *The Corrections* that I wrote immediately after reading *Underworld*. But I don't think my pages read like his, because I had a preference for rounder letters—*c*'s and *p*'s. I think of him as being more into *l*'s and *a*'s and *i*'s.

INTERVIEWER

C's and *p*'s?

FRANZEN

I kept seeing a plate of food with beet greens and liver and rutabaga—intense purple green, intense orange, rich rusty brown—and feeling a wish to write sentences that were juicy and sensuous.

INTERVIEWER

Do you mean the sound, too?

FRANZEN

No, the way they looked, the roundness of *b*'s and *g*'s, the juiciness. That's almost the last time I remember thinking about the words that way. Nowadays I have almost the opposite aesthetic—I'm looking for transparency.

INTERVIEWER

And when did you discover Pynchon?

FRANZEN

I'd come up with the plot of *The Twenty-Seventh City* when I was a college sophomore, in a playwriting workshop, and our instructor had told me I'd better take a look at Pynchon. I finally got around to it after I graduated and went back to Germany. I took *Gravity's Rainbow* along in mass-market paperback, and it utterly consumed me. It was like getting the flu to read that book. It was like I was fighting off some very aggressive infection. I started writing Pynchonian letters to my then-fiancée, and I think it's significant that she hated those letters and made her hatred of them known, and that I steered away from that voice—because of our relationship, because of an intense relationship with a woman. Which now seems to me emblematic: You could either play with the boys like that, and relegate women to minor and substantially objectified characters on the margin, or you could try to have a full-fledged relationship with a woman, in which case that kind of boy writing, however brilliant and masterful, was necessarily subordinate. It's worth noting that at this point in my life, I feel much more indebted to various female writers—Alice Munro, Christina Stead, Flannery O'Connor, Jane Smiley, Paula Fox, to name a few—than I do to Pynchon.

INTERVIEWER

,nat about the letters was Pynchonian?

FRANZEN

The tangly sentences, the overfullness of them, and a kind of dirty explicitness. A hipster jadedness. "Seen it all, done it all, don't mean shit." Like the dark side of R. Crumb.

And yet Pynchon's enterprise in that book—creating an immensely complex world in which conspiracy is the organizing principle—was something I internalized and tried to build on. I saw that I might be able to go beyond the unseen conspiracy to a *seen* conspiracy, inhabited by complicated characters with whom we might, moreover, sympathize. To turn the whole notion of the victim of conspiracy inside out and make the victim himself a problematic figure and the conspirators perhaps well justified. That was my best shot, as a twenty-three-year-old, at dealing with my brief but life-threatening infection with Pynchon.

INTERVIEWER

And that infection did not last to your later novels?

FRANZEN

No. Even in my first book, I found a better model in Coover. He had some of the same satiric and encyclopedic ambitions as Pynchon, but he was working at the level of characters and their relationships to one another, and I just gravitated to that.

INTERVIEWER

You've described your first two books as "systems novels."

FRANZEN

I had an idea of the social novel that I didn't realize was already outmoded. I rather naively believed that, if I could capture the way large systems work, readers would understand their place in those systems better and make better political decisions. I'd taken real delight in the books of the previous generation that had revealed these kinds of systems to me. In *The Twenty-Seventh City*, the systems were city and county government and regional economics. And there were various systems in *Strong Motion*, most notably the systems of science and religion—two violently opposing systems of making sense in the world.

This conception of the novel, I think, came out of my engagement with science fiction, which is all about concepts. You have a cool idea: What if we could travel back in time? What if in the future there's only one sex? And then the characters come into being to make that story happen. Going into my first two books, I did have several characters firmly stuck in my head, but many of the smaller characters were invented to serve the systems. Whereas, in my last two novels, the systems are there to serve the characters. There are lingering elements of the old method in *The Corrections*—I'd been fascinated, for example, by my parents' stories of cruises and, like Dave Wallace, I saw the cruise ship as somehow emblematic of our time. But my priorities have mostly flipped.

INTERVIEWER

How did you begin to write *Strong Motion*?

FRANZEN

bunch of things had happened. My first book had been published, and my wife and I had fled to Europe; things were getting hard in the marriage. And, perhaps not coincidentally, I'd fallen under the spell of religious writers, particularly Flannery O'Connor and Dostoyevsky. My wife and I began touring cathedrals and looking at medieval sculpture and Romanesque churches. *Wise Blood*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and the cathedral at Chartres are all examples of religious art, which is neither just religion nor just art; it's a special category, a special binding of the aesthetic and the devotional. O'Connor and Dostoyevsky venture intensely into the extremes of human psychology, but always with serious moral purpose. Because of the difficulties in my marriage, I was attracted to their search for moral purpose in emotional extremity. I imagined static lives being disrupted from without—literally shaken. I imagined violent scenes that would strip away the veneer and get people shouting angry moral truths at each other. I had the title *Strong Motion* very early on.

INTERVIEWER

When had you become interested in earthquakes?

FRANZEN

I'd been a research assistant in seismology—this was the excellent job that had funded the writing of *The Twenty-Seventh City*—and so I knew a lot about it, including the fact that human beings can cause earthquakes by pumping liquids underground. There are very few bridges between the geologic scale and the human scale, between the large forces of nature and the small forces of the heart, and I recognized early on that the phenomenon of humanly induced seismicity was kind of a gold mine literarily.

But *Strong Motion* is mainly a novel about an intense love affair. It spins outward from there to encompass an alternative Boston in which earthquakes are occurring. By that point in my life, relationships, for want of a better word, had presented themselves as being of undeniable primary importance. The conflict in my marriage could no longer be ignored.

INTERVIEWER

And that found its way into the novel?

FRANZEN

Strong Motion was a novel written by a person to whom things were happening as he wrote it. It was a third party in the relationship. My wife's own second novel was a fourth party. We brought these two extra figures into the house, so as to have much longer and more complicated discussions and fights. But I honestly have a poor recollection of how I wrote that book. It was a bad time, and we were traveling a lot—running, really—attempting geographic solutions to non-geographic problems.

One of the lines from *The Trial* that has always stayed with me is, approximately, "He had so much important, urgent work to do at the office, and he was losing so much time to his trial. Precisely now, when he needed to devote all his wits and strength and attention to his career, he instead had to worry about his trial." When I think about my own trajectory as a writer, it's in those terms. I began with an ambitious wish to be a writer of a certain stature, and to be mentioned in the company of such and such, and to produce a certain kind of masterful book that engages with contemporary culture and all that. I wanted to get on with the serious business of being an ambitious writer, but there was this damn trial welling up from within. It was certainly true in *Strong Motion*, when things were getting hard in the marriage, and it became all the more true in *The Corrections*: Precisely then, when I needed to focus all of my attention on writing a novel, my parents were falling apart. If you suffer with that for enough years, it eventually dawns on you that, in fact, you've misconstrued the real work of being a

.ovelist.

INTERVIEWER

You once described *The Corrections* as an attack on the novel's enemies, as an argument for the novel.

FRANZEN

The enemy I had in mind was materialism. The fear out of which that book was written was that the new materialism of the brain, which has given us drugs to change our personalities, and the materialism of consumer culture, which provides endless distractions and encourages the endless pursuit of more goods, were both antithetical to the project of literature, which is to connect with that which is unchanging and unchangeable, the tragic dimension of life.

INTERVIEWER

Patty describes the responsibility of parents to raise children who recognize reality.

FRANZEN

I am indeed interested in self-deception. Realist fiction presupposes that the author has access to the truth. It implies a superiority of the author to his or her comically blundering characters. *The Corrections* was written as a comedy, a somewhat angry comedy, and so the self-deception model worked perfectly. Self-deception is funny, and the writer gets to aggressively inflict painful knowledge on one character after another.

In *Freedom*, the recurrent metaphor is sleepwalking. Not that you're deceiving yourself—you're simply asleep, you're not paying attention, you're in some sort of dream state. *The Corrections* was preoccupied with the unreal, willfully self-deceptive worlds we make for ourselves to live in. You know, enchantment has a positive connotation, but even in fairy tales it's not a good thing, usually. When you're under enchantment, you're lost to the world. And the realist writer can play a useful and entertaining role in violently breaking the spell. But something about the position this puts the writer in, as a possessor of truth, as an epistemological enforcer, has come to make me uncomfortable. I've become more interested in joining the characters in their dream, and experiencing it with them, and less interested in the mere fact that it's a dream.

INTERVIEWER

The Corrections was your first effort to build a novel around Andy Aberant, but eventually you excised him, as you would later from *Freedom*.

FRANZEN

Yes, Andy of the undead has now failed twice to make the cut. He was a self-consciously morally compromised character, first as a Securities and Exchange Commission attorney, later as the operator of a bogus land trust. In *The Corrections* I imagined him involving himself in a family that was really, really shut down, and coming to have a relationship with each member of the family, helping them achieve what they couldn't achieve themselves. I'm always looking for ways to see things through fresh eyes, and it seemed to me potentially interesting to observe a family from the perspective of an essentially adopted son—"self-adopted in adulthood" was the notion. It was akin to observing the Probsts through the eyes and ears of those eavesdropping Indians.

INTERVIEWER

In an early section, published in *Granta*, you say that Andy came into the world needing people to believe that

knew everything.

FRANZEN

One of the reasons Andy never worked is that he was too much like me, at least the depressive side of me. I get depressed when I'm failing to get a novel going, and Andy seems to come along as the voice of my depressive, hyperintellectual distance from my own life. If he'd ever been able to rise to the level of parody, he might have worked as a character.

But those Lamberts just kept getting larger and larger. Alfred and Enid were always Alfred and Enid, their voices were taken from life. My parents were *not* Alfred and Enid, but on bad days they could sound like them. Chip and Gary and Denise had been floating around in my mind, in different avatars, for some years, with different occupations and in different situations. Figuring out how to gather these five characters into some believable semblance of a family took several very unpleasant years of false starts and note taking.

INTERVIEWER

The Corrections was the first book you wrote entirely on a computer.

FRANZEN

In terms of process, the one small difference between a typewriter and a computer is that a computer makes it easier to find fragments you've written and then forgotten about. When you work at a book for as long as I do, you end up doing a lot of assemblage from scavenged materials. And with a computer you're more likely, on a slow morning, to drift over to another file folder and open up something old. Chunks of text travel with you, rather than getting buried in a drawer or stored in some remote, inaccessible location.

One afternoon in 1995 I wrote six or eight pages about the gerontocracy of St. Jude, based on some Midwestern houses that I happened to know well. I'd just finished reading the manuscript of *Infinite Jest*. I'd been trying for several years to launch a grotesquely overplotted novel about Philadelphia and prisons, and reading a good friend's amazing manuscript roused me from my dogmatic slumbers, so to speak. Around the same time, I was also working on a short story about a person living in New York, trying to have a life, trying to make contact with women, and impeded by the fact that his father was sleeping in an enormous blue chair in his living room. I couldn't figure out where to go with the story, so I set it aside. But a few months later, when I desperately needed something to read at a *Paris Review*–sponsored event with David Means, I searched my computer and found these two chunks of writing that I could put together and read. Donald Antrim and Jeff Eugenides, whom I hardly knew, but who subsequently became good friends, came up afterward and said, "That was really good." *The Paris Review* went on to publish that chunk, and it became something I wanted to use in the novel, too.

INTERVIEWER

And it went smoothly after that?

FRANZEN

No. Then came further bad years, trying to make that ridiculous, overplotted monster work. It was finally another friend's work that roused me; I read the manuscript of *Underworld* on a Mexican vacation. I came home from that vacation and set aside the still-monstrous plot and plunged into the cruise-ship chapter and had an experience very similar to Alfred's in that chapter. I'd intended to write a simple, quick narrative about cruise-ship hilarities, and I fell through the surface of the present action into a long, long flashback. I was writing about

ordinary" evening with the Lamberts—basically just a small drama of Chip's refusal to eat his food. But DeLillo's method in the recycling chapter of *Underworld*, where various lines of thought are crisply sorted into alternating paragraphs in the same way that his main character is sorting his household trash, had attuned me to how much suspense and foreboding you can create simply by deploying paragraph breaks. In my case, I was sorting the family's four points of view by paragraph.

The writing process for that flashback was different from any process before or since, and it really changed my idea of what I was doing as a novelist. I'd quit cigarettes a month earlier, and as a result I was drinking tons of coffee. I'd get up in the morning and drink so much coffee that I made myself almost sick. Then I'd have to lie down and take a hard nap, which I could suddenly do because I was in better contact with my natural body rhythms. Instead of having a cigarette when I was feeling sleepy, why not just lie down and sleep? For the first time in my life, I could take these wonderful, intense twenty-minute naps. But then, because I was so loaded up with caffeine, I would come surging back up to the surface and go straight to the desk and write a page. And that was it for the day.

INTERVIEWER

Just one page?

FRANZEN

A page was enough, by then. If you read the biographies of people who have written good books, you often see the point where they suddenly come into themselves, and those weeks in the spring of 1997 were when I came into myself as a writer. They feel like some of the best weeks of writing I'll ever have. The discovery that I could write better about something as trivial as an ordinary family dinner than I could about the exploding prison population of the United States, and the corporatization of American life, and all the other things I'd been trying to do, was a real revelation.

INTERVIEWER

How did you conceive of the structure of the book?

FRANZEN

I was very aware of how time would be handled. Once I'd finally figured out that a large novel could be constructed out of multiple short novels, each of them building to a crisis in which the main character can no longer escape reality, I had an opportunity to play with time management—how far back into the past to plunge after the opening section, how to parcel out the gradual return toward the present, where to situate the meeting of the backstory with the present story. I sketched out in pencil how the chronology would work in each of the five novellas, and I was pleased to have a different structure for each of them. I also liked the way the graphs looked: A horizontal line, representing the present action, was interrupted by chunks of backstory which would rise at various slopes like something surfacing. Like a missile rising up out of the past to intersect with a plane flying horizontally in the present.

INTERVIEWER

Both of your first two novels end with motion, with important issues still open, and that seems to offer an interesting contrast to the endings of your last two novels, which in certain ways are more tightly resolved.

FRANZEN

can see that lack of resolution now as a young writer's move. You find that you have talent as a novelist, you understand a lot more about the world than many other people your age do, and yet you haven't lived enough—certainly I hadn't—to really have something to say. Everything is still guessed at, every conclusion is provisional. And this came to be my gripe with the postmodern aversion to closure. It's like, Grow up already! Take some responsibility for your narrative! I'm not looking for *the* meaning, but I am looking for *a* meaning, and you're denying me a vital element of making sense of any story, which is its ending! Aversion to closure can be refreshing at certain historical moments, when ossified cultural narratives need to be challenged. But it loses its subversive bite in a culture that celebrates eternal adolescence. It becomes part of the problem.

INTERVIEWER

Where were you writing *The Corrections*?

FRANZEN

I built an office up in Harlem in 1997. It had a huge south-facing window looking directly at 125th Street, which is one of the noisier streets of New York. I knew I had to block out the light, because the space was so intensely bright, but I also built a second window for sound protection.

Working without cigarettes had made me much more prone to distraction. Cigarettes had always been the way I'd snapped myself to attention. Cigarettes had made me smart, and smart had been the organizing principle for a couple of books. Smart had been the locus of my manhood, but it was no longer getting me anywhere. I'd quit because I'd decided that they were getting in the way of feeling. Without cigarettes, though, I was so easily - irritated by even moderately bright light or moderate noise that I immediately became dependent on earplugs. They became a kind of a cigarette replacement, as did a darkened room. And that's been the scene ever since.

INTERVIEWER

Despite the silence, music often features in your books.

FRANZEN

I'm more envious of music than of any other art form—the way a song can take your head over and make you feel so intensely and so immediately. It's like snorting the powder, it goes straight to your brain.

Each of my books has had a set of songs associated with it. There's always rock and roll in the mix, but the most important music for *The Corrections* was probably *Petrushka*, the Stravinsky ballet. *Petrushka* corresponded not only to the feeling I was after but to the structure, too, the relation of tonally disparate parts to an ultimately unified whole. I also kept coming back to Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians* as a model for the kind of metaphoric layering and interconnection I was after.

INTERVIEWER

The Corrections is full of references to the brain, but in *Freedom* the whole language of brain chemistry and brain architecture barely registers.

FRANZEN

Well, you know, new times, new enemies. *Freedom* was conceived and eventually written in a decade where language was under as concerted an assault as we've seen in my lifetime. The propaganda of the Bush administration, its appropriation of words like *freedom* for cynical short-term political gain, was a clear and

esent danger. This was also the decade that brought us YouTube and universal cell-phone ownership and Facebook and Twitter. Which is to say: brought us a whole new world of busyness and distraction. So the defense of the novel moved to different fronts. Let's take one of those buzzwords, *freedom*, and try to restore it to its problematic glory. Let's redouble our efforts to write a book with a narrative strong enough to pull you into a place where you can feel and think in ways that are difficult when you're distracted and busy and electronically bombarded. The impulse to defend the novel, to defend the turf, is stronger than ever. But the foes change with the times.

INTERVIEWER

Did you conceive *Freedom* initially as a political novel?

FRANZEN

Yes, I spent several years looking for some interesting way into our national political narrative, some Washingtonian wrinkle that hadn't been explored to death in other media. But I couldn't find that wrinkle, and, frankly, I was also never able to get past my immediate partisan anger to the more open-minded place where truthful novels are written. I was making the same mistake I always seem to make initially, trying to write from the top down. I always have to learn the hard way to begin with character.

INTERVIEWER

When did you begin to see the shape of the book?

FRANZEN

Only near the end. As late as seven months before I handed it in, I had in mind a completely different form for the book. I thought it was going to be a novel of documents. My perennial refrain when I'm working is "I don't know what the book is about! I don't have a story!" Really only when the last couple of chapters come into focus does that refrain cease.

In the spring of 2007, after five years of periodic failure with the book, I'd made enough progress that I could have a very strong drink with my editor and sketch out a love-triangle story with a Patty-like character at its center. He said, "That sounds like a great, funny short novel, I'll give you a contract for it." So we wrote up a contract with a delivery date of ten months later, because I was still intending to write about politics and wanted the book out before the 2008 elections. I went to Berlin, to breathe the good old German literary air, and I tried to use the isolation and the deadline pressure to get some chapters banged out. But the characters weren't there yet. I came back home and flagellated myself all summer, but the characters still weren't there. Eventually I reached a point of such despair that I decided to take a year off.

INTERVIEWER

And you did take a year off?

FRANZEN

Well, nearly. I put five solid months into a *New Yorker* piece on the environmental situation in China. I also researched a second piece, a medium-term longitudinal study of twenty-two-year-olds arriving in New York City, fresh out of college. I ultimately decided not to write that one, out of kindness to my subjects, who were wonderful kids and said far more to a *New Yorker* reporter than they should have.

at piece grew out of my coming to terms with not having had children, my sense that I was getting old before my time, that I'd lost a vital connection with youth and thus with hope and possibility. The China piece came out of a question that Dave and I talked about constantly: How can we keep sitting in our rooms and struggling with fiction when there is so much wrong with the world? During the summer after I signed the book contract, my sense of duty became utterly oppressive. So much bad stuff was happening in the country—and happening to wild birds around the world!—that I felt I just couldn't keep wasting months. I had to go out and do something, get my hands dirty with some problem. Only after the China piece failed to find a discernible audience or have any discernible impact did I get it through my head that I might actually have more effect on the world by retreating to my room and doing what I was put on earth to do.

INTERVIEWER

How do you know when the work is going well?

FRANZEN

The word I've been using to talk about that lately is *adequacy.* My primary reader and consultant for *Freedom* was my friend Elisabeth Robinson, who's been struggling with her own new novel, and one of her gifts to me was her saying, "You only have to make this book adequate." To which she was nice enough to add: "Your adequate is very good."

When I was younger, the main struggle was to be a "good writer." Now I more or less take my writing abilities for granted, although this doesn't mean I always write well. And, by a wide margin, I've never felt less self--consciously preoccupied with language than I did when I was writing *Freedom.* Over and over again, as I was producing chapters, I said to myself, "This feels nothing like the writing I did for twenty years—this just feels transparent." I wasn't seeing in the pages any of the signs I'd taken as encouraging when I was writing *The Corrections.* The sentences back then had had a pop. They were, you know, serious prose sentences, and I was able to vanquish my doubts simply by rereading them. When I was showing *Corrections* chapters to David Means, I basically expected his rubber stamp, because the sentences had a level of effulgence that left me totally defended. But here, with *Freedom*, I felt like, "Oh my God, I just wrote however many metaphor-free pages about some weird days in the life of a college student, I have no idea if this is any good." I needed validation in a way I never had before.

I was admittedly somewhat conscious that this was a good sign—that it might mean that I was doing something different, pressing language more completely into the service of providing transparent access to the stories I was telling and to the characters in those stories. But it still felt like a leap into the void.

INTERVIEWER

It is often said about your recent books that they look more like nineteenth-century novels than twenty-first-century ones.

FRANZEN

The people at the Swedish Academy, who bestow the Nobel Prize, recently confessed their thoroughgoing lack of interest in American literary production. They say we're too insular, we're not writing about the world, we're only writing about ourselves. Given how Americanized the world has become, I think they're probably wrong about this—we probably say more about the world by writing about ourselves than a Swedish author does by writing about a trip to Africa. But even if they're right, I don't think our insularity is necessarily a bad thing.

Nineteenth-century Russia strikes me as a parallel. Russia is its own little world, famously good at repelling

ursions by foreign powers, and it's maintained a separate superpower identity for centuries. Maybe that very insularity, that feeling of living in a complete but not quite universal world, creates certain kinds of literary possibility. All of those old Russians were dramatically engaged with the question of what would become of their country, and the question didn't seem inconsequential, because Russia was a vast nation. Whereas, when a Liechtensteiner wrestles with the future of Liechtenstein, who really cares? It's possible that the U.S. and Russia are exactly the right size to be hospitable to a certain kind of expansive novelistic project. England was, too, for a time, thanks to its empire, and the golden age of the English novel coincided with its imperial domination. There again, it wasn't the whole world, it was just a very large microcosm. True cosmopolitanism is incompatible with the novel, because novelists need particularity. But we also need some room to move around. And we're lucky to have both here.

That said, I don't feel particularly nineteenth century. All of the issues that became problematic with modernism still need to be negotiated in every book.

INTERVIEWER

And yet it doesn't seem that novelty is all that important to you anymore.

FRANZEN

I'm wary of the pursuit of novelty for novelty's sake. At the same time, if I don't feel like I'm doing something new, I can't do anything. Reading time is so scarce nowadays, and alternative entertainment is so widely available, that I'm keenly attuned, as a reader, to whether a book's author seems to be experiencing something new or is just turning the crank.

There's always new content, of course. Content will carry you a certain distance; it can rescue you when you're in trouble formally. I think the importance of content is what Harold Bloom, for example, really underestimates in the novel. Bloom's at his best with poetry, because poetry is so purely language. But his approach becomes something close to nonsense when he applies it to novels, because he's still basically just looking at language. Language is important, absolutely, but the history of the novel is only partly stylistic. Faulkner obviously begat many influences, ditto Hemingway, ditto Joyce, ditto Carver and Lish, ditto DeLillo. But rhetorical innovation is just one of the many streams that feed into the river of fiction.

INTERVIEWER

Where do the modernists figure in your development?

FRANZEN

I have learned and feel I will continue to learn an enormous amount from Proust—his purely novelistic gifts, his recognition of how much you can gain by letting a story slowly extend over long stretches of time, his method of rendering the sense of gradual dawning as we live our lives. Things are not what they initially seem, things are often exactly the opposite of what they seem.

And Conrad: the prescience of *The Secret Agent*, the psychological brutality and intensity of *Victory*, the incisive critique of colonialism in *Nostromo*. Those books are marvels to me in both content and method. Conrad devotes the first half of *Nostromo* to slowly building to a set piece that he then omits, so that he can jump to a different place at a different time and blow your socks off there. He built himself up to a scene, he was then not interested in writing, at which point he miraculously discovered, "Oh, but there is a story here, it's just not the one I thought!" It's breathtaking. I love it, love it.

ERVIEWER

You once gave a beautiful description of *Ulysses* as being like a cathedral.

FRANZEN

Maybe my Joyce time is still coming. I like *Portrait of the Artist* a lot. I like *Dubliners* even more. But I can never shake the feeling that, after those books, Joyce was chasing a certain kind of status. He was inventing the very category in which he wanted his work to place him. And that's where the cathedral image comes from: I'm going to build something grand that you're going to admire and study for decades. There's a sort of chilly Jesuitical quality to Joyce, and the Jesuits are, of course, great statusmongers and elitists. I'm an old egalitarian Midwesterner, and that kind of personality just rubs me the wrong way. I find someone like Beckett much more sympathetic. He's often harder to read than Joyce, so it's not a matter of the difficulty. It's the feeling that Beckett is going after a really personally felt horror and finding comedy and universality in that horror. He's obviously very concerned with language, but the language is in the service of something not merely thought but also *felt*. And that, to me, is a friendlier enterprise.

I should also say something about those words *status* and *contract*. Probably through faults of its own, my essay on literary difficulty and William Gaddis has been somewhat misunderstood. The primary thing I failed to make clear was that the terminology of *status* and *contract* was Gaddis's own. As far as one can tell from his rather confused and opaque nonfiction writings, he was a big status guy. He seems to have believed that the world really was better off in the late Middle Ages than it is today, when the world is arranged by vulgar contract. He seems to have preferred the older status system, where high was high and low was low and great works of art were understood by very few. The reason I seized on those words is that *status* has another, more common meaning in this country—"status symbol," "literary status," and so on.

INTERVIEWER

Is the response of critics important to you?

FRANZEN

I'd be lying if I pretended that Terrence Rafferty's vicious review of *The Twenty-Seventh City* in *The New Yorker* didn't have an effect on the way I went about writing *Strong Motion*. Basically, though, with very few exceptions, I stopped reading my reviews after James Wood's piece on *The Corrections*. I'd looked to forward to it because he can be a very perceptive reader, and I knew that we had some common enemies and enthusiasms. And what he wrote was a quibbling and carping and narrowly censorious thing, with a willfully dense misreading of my *Harper's* essay. That disappointment, along with fifteen unwisely spent minutes of Googling myself in 2001, pretty well cured me of the need to read about myself.

INTERVIEWER

And the overwhelming response to *Freedom* hasn't changed that?

FRANZEN

Nah.

INTERVIEWER

What are people missing or overlooking in your work?

I think they may be overlooking *Strong Motion* a little bit. But what seems to me most often overlooked is that I consider myself essentially a comic writer. This was particularly true with *The Discomfort Zone*, which I wrote for laughs, and which I'm told wasn't laughed at in all quarters.

I'm reminded of a very earnest young Italian man who came up to me after a reading in Rome at which I'd read some of my breakup stories. He said to me, with this kind of tragic face, "I don't understand. You're reading about people who are going through terrible pain, and everyone in the audience is laughing." I don't remember what I said to him, but I'd like to think I said, "Exactly."